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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000728

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SUBJECT: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTION: COSTLY WIN FOR
PRESIDENT LEE

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In the April 9 general elections, in which voters threw in their ballot for all 299 seats in the National Assembly, the ruling Grand National Party (GNP) gained a small majority with 153 seats. Nevertheless, the GNP majority combined with the surprisingly good showing by independent conservative candidates and those from minor parties signals a major parliamentary ideological shift from progressive to conservative. Within the GNP, however, the battles may only be beginning. President Lee lost his closest confidants while supporters of his political rival Park Geun-hye won about 50 seats, many out of GNP. The slim GNP majority means that President Lee will have to make compromises with the Park group and/or other conservatives in order to get his legislation through.

¶2. (SBU) The election outcome also demonstrated that regionalism in Korea is alive and well in South Korea. The United Democratic Party cleaned up in the Jeolla Provinces while the GNP won most of the seats in the Gyeongsang Provinces. The Chungcheong region also saw the birth of its own regional party: Lee Hoi-chang's Liberty First Party. With factional and regional fight making headlines, there was no room for political issue or policy debate. Predictably, voters showed limited interest; voter turnout was record low (46.1 percent), down by 14.6 percent from the previous 17th National Assembly election (60.6 percent). END SUMMARY.

Progressives Perish

¶3. (U) The opposition UDP (United Democratic Party) was the big loser, gaining only 81 seats, about half the number in the previous election. The extreme left minor parties also took hits - the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) got 5 seats, again only half its current 9 seats, and its splinter New Progressive Party (NPP) failed to win any. Also in this camp is Moon Kuk-hyun's Renewal of Korea Party, which won three seats.

¶4. (U) The GNP's 153 seats fell well short of its goal, because pundits had been predicting 160-180 seats. Still, independent conservative candidates and minor conservative parties chalked up surprising wins. The Pro-Park Alliance

(PPA), comprised of Park Geun-hye supporters controversially prevented from running under the GNP banner, earned 14 seats; another 12 pro-Park Geun-hye candidates won as independents. Also solidly in the conservative camp is three-time presidential contender Lee Hoi-chang's Liberal Forward Party (LFP) with 18 seats. Thus the conservatives control around 200 seats, a commanding presence in the 299-seat chamber and well above the 130 seats they won in the last election.

Provincial Power

¶5. (SBU) Korea's deep-seated regionalism remained intact. The GNP (or conservative independents) practically swept the southeast Gyeongsang region, with only a handful of the 68 districts -- Cho Kyung-tae (UDP) won in Pusan, Choi Chul-kuk (UDP) in Gimhae, Kang Ki-gap (DLP) in Sacheon, and Kwon Young-ghil (DLP) in Changwon -- going to liberal/progressive candidates. Correspondingly, the UDP won big in the traditionally liberal Jeolla region; no GNP candidate won in Jeolla. The Chungcheong region, the traditional battle ground of the two major parties, decided to go its own way, backing its native son Lee Hoi-chang's new party, the LFP, which took 13 out of the 16 South Chungcheong and Daejeon districts.

Power Jockeying

¶6. (SBU) The April 9 election was a qualified victory for the President. The election outcome puts about 100 "Pro-Lee" lawmakers in place, but they will need significant help to form a majority. Moreover, the surprising defeat of some of

President Lee's key confidants like Lee Jae-o and Lee Bang-ho could lead to a reshuffling within the pro-Lee faction. One Blue House contact noted the Lees and other key aides would surely find other positions in the Administration.

¶7. (C) An important reason for the defeat of key Lee Myung-bak faction leaders is Park Geun-hye, who had accused them of victimizing her own supporters in the nomination. Staying put in her Daegu home, Park refused to campaign for any candidate. However, her supporters rallied to her cause, even starting a new party, the Pro-Park Alliance. They promoted key Park faction members and also targeted the high profile legislators from the Lee camp, many of whom lost what would have been easy races.

¶8. (C) Park supporters won 56 districts -- 30 within the GNP, 12 independents, and 14 Pro-Park Alliance candidates. The whole nomination and election process, therefore, validated Park as a major political figure with deep support among lawmakers and the public at large. Moreover, she no longer has to contend, at least in the National Assembly, with pro-Lee lawmakers like Lee Jae-o, Lee Bang-ho and Park Hyung-joon who all lost their seats.

¶9. (C) The outcome for the UDP was not quite a disaster the liberals had feared. Certainly, with 81, the liberals won many more seats than what anyone had expected after the UDP's disastrous showing in the presidential election. The UDP, with support from the fringe left-leaning parties, will be able to function as a legitimate progressive political force. Still, the of many of the senior party members -- Kim Geun-tae, Han Myoung-sook, Yoo In-tae, Shin Ki-nam -- as well as prominent 386ers -- Im Jong-seok, Choi Jae-cheon, Woo Sang-ho -- might make their attempts to find their voice more difficult and could spark more infighting in the run-up to the UDP party convention likely at the end of May.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) There were two clear winners in the National Assembly

elections: Park Geun-hye and conservatives in Korea. There will be plenty of power-politicking as the conservative leaders, principally President Lee and Park Geun-hye, try to find a formula to work with each other. Lee, of course, has all the power levers associated with being the president. His, however, is a single-term presidency, while Park has emerged as the clear favorite among the Korean voters as the most likely occupant of the Blue House next time around.

VERSHBOW